





FITCHBURG HISTORICAL SOCIETY

HISTORY

OF THE

MEETING HOUSE IN FITCHBURG

COMMONLY KNOWN AS

“THE LORD’S BARN”

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“THE LORD’S BARN.”

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On the Ashburnham hill road, just where Deane hill begins to dip down toward the West, is a spot around which cluster peculiar memories. Here for more than a generation stood “The New-Meeting-House in Fitchburg,” known in later days as “The Lord’s Barn.” The story of this building of God is unique in ecclesiastical history.

At a meeting called for that purpose, May 17, 1785, the citizens of Westminster “Voted to sett off the Westerly part of the Town,” to form the town of Gardner. On June 27, the General Court in answer to a petition to that effect incorporated the new town. In the warrant calling the meeting at which final action was taken an article was inserted upon petition of a number of inhabitants of the northeasterly part of the town asking that the petitioners with their estates be ceded to the town of Fitchburg. It was summarily voted to dismiss this article.

But this did not end nor indeed did it begin the matter. This move was only part of a plan to form an entirely new township from portions of Fitchburg, Westminster, Ashburnham and Ashby. Fitchburg at this time was populated by only a few hundred inhabitants, the majority of whom were widely scattered over its territory. There were a few houses near the meeting-house not far from where the railroad station now stands. The next most thickly settled portion of the town was on Deane Hill, about four miles distant, and this was probably the most enterprising and at that time prosperous part of Fitchburg. It had a commanding position, the soil was rich and fertile, and the people rather prided themselves upon their comparative independence, having a little community of their own, with a number of good neighbors in the adjoining towns.

The time had come when a new meeting-house must be built and the location of it became a question of great interest to all the people. Some chose the old site: others earnestly demanded a new one. For the sake of better accommodation and to end the controversy the idea of a new town-

ship was a most desirable thing to be accomplished. Besides this were the taxes for church support, with church privileges four miles away, and taxes were considerably increased by damages to roads and bridges along through that portion of the town which is now the thickly settled part of the city. For these portions of their taxes they received small returns. The river, which has added so much to the prosperity of the place, was a nuisance on account of freshets, indeed a curse instead of a blessing: again it now seems in the question of sewerage something of a nuisance.

A new town then was to be the cure for these troubles: for this they had a sufficient population, ample room, financial means, and enterprise. They also had in their neighborhood two taverns, Jedediah Cooper's tavern in Westminster, farm now owned by William Hartnett; and Jacob Upton's tavern in Fitchburg, now occupied by the family of Mr. Charles Fairbanks; a store kept by Capt. John Upton, and a blacksmith's shop. Dr. Ball practised medicine in this vicinity, so only a meeting-house and a minister were wanting to make their town complete. They appealed

to their fellow citizens in town meetings; and to the Legislature of the state in petitions. Such a petition signed by Jacob Upton and sixty-three others was presented to the Senate Feb. 1, 1791. Such a storm of opposition was aroused that the Legislature gave "leave to withdraw" to the petitioners. The new town was to be christened "Belvoir," beautiful view, for the outlook is beautiful; Ashburnham Center nestling among the valleys toward the West; Westminster crowning the hills on the Southwest, Wachusett rising in majesty and beauty with the intervening hills and valleys on the South. A similar attempt to incorporate the new town of Vernon to cover the same territory made about a quarter of a century afterwards in 1815 also signally failed. No further attempts in this line were made.

One thing, however, did materialize and that was the new church; for with the movement for a new town was carried forward to partial success the work of building a house of worship as an important part of the same general plan. The first step in this project was the following agreement: "We, the Subscribers are desirous to be set

off from the several towns to which we belong and join mutually with each other and build a meetinghouse near the Laws' corner on the county road." This paper has no date but probably was drawn early in 1786, and was signed by 57 persons; thirty-three from Fitchburg, sixteen from Westminster, six from Ashburnham and two from Ashby, thus showing the relative interest of the several towns in the desired advantages. On May 31, 1786, the subscribers and probably others met at the house of Jacob Upton in Fitchburg, and voted "to build a meeting-house near Mr. Thomas Laws corner." At a subsequent meeting it was "voted to set up the frame 45 feet square with a hipped roof." Captain Flint, Reuben Smith and Abraham Willard were made a committee "to draw an obligation for those persons to sign that are disposed to assist in building said house." This obligation, dated Aug. 15, 1786, was as follows: "We the subscribers do obligate ourselves to get such a number of Lots of Timber for a Meeting-house frame such as we shall subscribe against our names and likewise stone in order to underpin the same and such parts of labor as shall be necessary to effect said building and likewise

bring the timber and stone to the spot where said frame is to stand by the first of May next." Forty-nine names were attached and some contributed material, some labor, and some rie, each according to his liking. The question of location then arose, so Mr. David McIntire offered to give for the purpose a lot of land lying just within Fitchburg, and the offer was accepted. The work of collecting material was slow, so it was not till the spring of 1788 that it was ready for use. On the 19th of April the framing began and continued during the summer. John Smith's father came up from the Ned Smith place with a broad ax on his shoulder to help hew the timbers, which were of white oak, the largest of them said to be 18 inches square and no one knows how long. The frame having been completed a meeting was held Oct. 24. to prepare for the raising. Owing to the heavy timbers it was a great undertaking and careful provision must be made. An interesting and suggestive subscription paper was drawn. One Westminster signer promised "10 men and their board and 2 gallons of rum;" another "10 men and 10 quarts of rum;" another "1 barrel of Cyder;" another "2

men;" another "4 quarts of rum." One was to furnish "6 pike poles, 18 feet long;" another "6 pike poles, 15 feet long;" another, "6 pike poles, 20 feet long." It was agreed that the raising should be on Oct. 29, beginning at sunrise. This plan it is probable was carried out and it must have been a great day in Zion. The building was placed 12 feet from the town line.

No record has been found of another meeting of the proprietors for nearly a year, but on Sept. 9, 1789, they came together and voted "to sell the pues." This was a strange thing to do for there was not a "pue" in the building, besides there was little more than the skeleton of a church yet erected, while the frame had only been partially covered and enclosed, so that it was necessary to advertise for boards, shingles, nails and men to place them. Nevertheless, out of the 36 "pues" in the plan of the building 19 were soon sold. So far as known these were the only sales of church property ever made until the final disposal of the building, when \$36, it is said, were the proceeds of what was really sold. At last the house of God was so far completed as to be of some protection from the weather and warrant attempts to

hold religious services within it. The church has been described by those who remembered it as commodious and high posted, with a good pulpit, plenty of good benches for seats, a door on hinges and a carpenters' bench to separate the singers' seats from the benches occupied by the congregation. There was no chimney or stove and never even a single pane of glass in the house. The door was in the middle of the front part, facing the road, and rude board shutters, which were more or less removed for services, served for windows. Swallows flew sometimes in and out, over the heads of the people during services.

At a meeting of those interested held July 7, 1790, it was voted "to have preaching in the new meeting-house as soon as may be." It was also voted to have Mr. Payson of Fitchburg, Mr. Rice of Westminster, Mr. Cushing of Ashburnham and Mr. Adams of Lunenburg, ministers of the several towns in that vicinity, to preach. It was also at the same meeting agreed "to have some seats prepared," to hear Mr. Gardner of Leominster, and to send for Mr. Brown of Winchendon. Governor Brooks said Dr. Payson was the first to preach in the new church. Later in

the season the following letter was sent by a committee of the proprietors to Rev. Mr. Whitney, minister of Shirley:

"From the proprietors of the New Meeting House in Fitchburg.

"Reverend Sir. It is our desire that you would extend, so far your Piety (pity?) towards us as to come and give us a Day's preaching in the New Meeting-house that we have lately set up on purpose for the publick worship. And we humbly hope that our gratitude therefor will be no disagreeable return for so great a favor.

Sept ye 7th 1790."

It seems probable that some if not all of these ministers responded favorably to these invitations. It is also probable that the proprietors in due time found that something more than gratitude was needed to secure preachers, for on the 18th of August, 1791, a committee was chosen "to carry a subscription paper around to get money to hire preaching with." It was afterward agreed to send for Mr. Fuller of Princeton to come and preach a day and also for Mr. Davis of Holden to come again. Records of several important meetings of the proprietors held in 1792 have been preserved in a little improvised record

book, after which nothing was written until "Apr. ye 12, 1799," when it was voted "that a Committee consisting of Dr. Benjamin Marshall, Mr. Jackson Durrant and Lieut. John Goodale, be appointed to git subscribers;" and there the record abruptly ends. But the most famous of the preachers who ever discoursed in the new meeting house were Jesse Lee and Lorenzo Dow. The eccentric Dow, whose fame has gone out in all the world on his great itinerant journeys, or more than one occasion came to Fitchburg. He preached at the new church Oct. 26, 1796, and likely on other dates. His visits to this vicinity must have been long remembered. These that helped to turn the world upside down came hither also. Jesse Lee, the great apostle of Methodism to New England, preached one Sunday at this New Meeting-House. Lee attended the conference at Lynn which opened July 25, 1794. There he was appointed elder, later known as presiding elder, by Bishop Asbury. His district included Needham, Boston, Lynn, Marblehead, Readfield, Orange and Fitchburg; that is, all of Eastern Massachusetts with all New Hampshire thrown into the bargain. Aug. 7, he

parted from the preachers and came up to Fitchburg through Concord and Harvard. He was guest of David McIntire, who resided near the church, from Friday, Aug. 8, to Monday, Aug. 11. Sunday, Aug. 10th, 1794, he preached morning and afternoon at the new meeting house in "Fitchburgh." From here he went on up into New Hampshire and then to Orange, Wilbraham and on down into Connecticut. There can be no doubt that the Methodist itinerants have completely revolutionized not only the manner but the very doctrines of preaching in New England; for they came shouting "free grace, free gospel and free salvation."

The men who erected this new church were not free thinkers nor infidels, nor were they of those who cared not for the things that pertain to the kingdom of God. Nor was it that they wished altogether to shirk their responsibility to the churches already established. This house of worship was the work of the residents in its vicinity without regard to creeds, going with an honest purpose to bring religious privileges within nearer reach; so far were they removed from meeting houses already built.

Most of the interested parties contributed during these years under consideration to the churches already established in the various towns, likely however as a taxation. Besides this the ministers invited to preach were sound in faith, of good repute, of acknowledged piety and of ability that was recognized in all this region. However this forward movement helped to bring a greater religious freedom and was one of the things that led to the complete divorce in 1835 between church and state, so Deane Hill became a kind of ecclesiastical Bunker Hill.

The church without a steeple was never entirely finished as a place for worship, was never dedicated and it never properly represented any particular parish or denomination. So far as can be learned, no regular religious services were held in it even for a single year. In its later history, itinerant preachers and exhorters of any and every name and some with no particular form of religious doctrine occupied the pulpit, for those who might care to listen; but gradually with the passing years these services were less and less in frequency, and finally altogether ceased. So the new

old meetinghouse became at last a kind of storehouse but never a stable and through its open door the children sometimes went in to play. Severely plain, unfinished, even at its best, suffering from neglect, disintegrating by the ravages of time it early came to be known as "The Lord's Barn." It is told that one day two men, one a comparative stranger, were riding past the church. The stranger asked, "What is that building?" "The Lord's house," was the reply. "I should think it was the Lord's barn," was the rejoinder. John Smith told me that it was customary for the men after services to go to the adjoining taverns for the drinks, and probably some paid their visits before the opening devotions.

In 1825 or 1826, as nearly as can be ascertained, the proprietors had the building demolished and the timbers and proceeds were divided among them. Mrs. John Smith, who was a Carter, told me that she could remember lumber from the old church as piled near her father's house. It is said that in recent years a large stick of one of its timbers was in some use somewhere on Newton Place in Fitchburg. Such was the fate of the first building erected in this region for the worship of God by voluntary contributions.

For seven years annual commemorative services have been held in September of each year on the site of the meeting-house. In these services ministers and people of different denominational names have had part. At the first of these meetings a contribution was taken which with later subscriptions amounted to about \$50. This with labor given placed a new stone memorial wall along the roadside in front. A large boulder was set up for a monument bearing on a bronze tablet this inscription "Site of the New Meeting House Known in History as the Lord's Barn, 1788—1825." At the second service, in 1904, this wall and monument were formally dedicated with appropriate exercises. These meetings have been well attended by many people coming to this sacred spot for rest and worship.

The utopian dream of a new town was never realized: the timbers, rough hewn, of the old church, have likely gone back to dust; not one foundation stone is left upon another, but the influences of the teachings preached within its walls have gone out into the great world and are still living and active; eternity alone can reveal the truth concerning many who thus have

been led or at least guided from darkness to light and from the power of Satan unto God.

The writer is greatly indebted for many of the facts in this paper to Rev. Wm. S. Heywood in his History of Westminster, and also to James H. Laws of Westminster, John Smith and wife, Mrs. Dolly S. Parks (mother of Gilbert M. Parks) of Fitchburg, and to his mother, Mrs. Delana Lapham Hardy of Brookline, N. H., a native of Fitchburg. All of these persons are now deceased except possibly Mr. Heywood.

Notes.

"Citizens who desired paid 'ministers' tax' for the support of preaching at this meeting house"—Sentinel, Sept., 1903.

The Cooper Tavern went up in a baptism of fire some 15 years ago.

Mrs. Samuel Hawes, (later the wife of Rev. John Wood,) said some years ago that Voldostine Johnson, a mulatto from Vermont, tore down The Lord's Barn and used a part of the lumber for a wood-choppers' cabin for himself. Capt. Martin Newton, who built cotton mills in Newton Lane in 1812, used some of the largest timbers for a big lathe for turning long shafting.

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